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# MORE THAN WORDS CAN SAY

*Liturgy on Jesuit Campuses*

By Paul Covino

### Celebrating liturgy at the College of the Holy Cross.



with a musician?" and then sent him off to study English instead.

Liturgy – and by way of association, music – were, in the past, considered the domain of orders such as the Benedictines, while scant attention was often paid to them in the formation of Jesuits and in Jesuit education. Much has changed, and in recent decades, Jesuits and the schools of the AJCU have made no little contribution to the study and practice of liturgy (see box on page 13).

This should come as no great surprise for an educational enterprise grounded in the premise that God can be found in all things or for a religious community that holds a sacramental view as enunciated in Saint Paul's letter to the Romans: "Ever since the creation of the world God's eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made" (1:20). For Christians, this sacramental view reaches its epitome in the incarnation of the divine in the person of Jesus Christ, and so theologians speak of Christ as the primordial sacrament. In turn, Christians experienced their liturgical gatherings as the privileged place of encounter with Christ, and identified various liturgical celebrations as sacraments. In the words of St. Leo the Great, "What was visible in the Lord has passed over into the sacraments" (Sermon 74), or to quote the Second Vatican Council, "Christ is always present in his Church, especially in its liturgical celebrations" (*Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* #7).

While this theology may be specific to Christian liturgy, Jesuit campuses today are home to liturgies from a vari-

ety of religious traditions, in addition to ecumenical and interfaith gatherings for worship. At a time when, as Richard Blake notes in another article of this issue, there is significant fragmentation even among academic disciplines on a given campus, it is tempting to relegate liturgy to the school's periphery as the parochial concern of campus ministers and particularly pious students. If, however, we value and seek an integration of learning, then Jesuit schools should boldly draw from their deep well of religious experience, including in particular campus liturgy which brings together verbal, symbolic, ritual and aesthetic elements. For all their theological differences and ceremonial variations, the liturgies of all religious traditions are, at their core, rituals that regularly provide a synthesis of language and symbolic action to realize an encounter with the divine.

At their best, our campus liturgies immerse students and other participants in an experience that involves not only their minds, but also their senses. In providing the occasion for this encounter with the divine, our campus liturgies are most effective when they hold in balance both words and the non-verbal elements that offer more than words can say: music, art, movement, smells, the experience of community, and that most elusive element of contemporary academic life, silence. In doing so, our campus liturgies appeal not only to those who experience God in the logic of a well edited homily and the theology of a finely crafted prayer, but also to those who find, and develop their relationship with, God through the experience

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**E**ach year during Lent, one of the senior Jesuits on our campus asks me about the upcoming Holy Week liturgies in the college chapel. With a broad grin, he then invariably says, "You know, there's no one more lost than a Jesuit during Holy Week!" A Jesuit colleague at another AJCU school who is approaching retirement recounts a conversation that he had with his superior during his early years in the Society of Jesus. When it was time for the then young Jesuit to be assigned to graduate studies in the subject that he would later teach, the superior asked him what he would like to study. He responded "music," to which the superior replied, "but what would we do



of a gathered community of believers, the architectural details and arrangement of the space for worship, the melody of a beautifully composed hymn, the play of colors in stained glass, the flicker of light from candles, the smell of aromatic incense, the act of ritual eating and drinking, the various postures of

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communal prayer, the visual feast of art and seasonal decoration, the movement of processions, the collective times of silence, and the offering of money or other gifts to serve the poor with whom we profess solidarity.

**B**

y offering a synthesis of these many elements, liturgy on our Jesuit campuses provides an important model for our larger enterprise of learning. If the privileged place of encounter with the divine for a religious community is one that attends to and involves the verbal as well as the physical and other non-verbal elements, then the noble goal of learning is perhaps

best served by a synthesis that respects the verbal and the non-verbal, and connects mind, body and spirit. This is not to denigrate the important role played by verbal learning, but rather to suggest that, as in liturgy, other elements say as much as, and oftentimes more than, words alone. We grow in wisdom when we attend to our mind, our body and our spirit, and to the connection among them. So, the learning environments of our Jesuit schools offer books and beauty, computers and contemplation, lectures and liturgy, symposia and silence, research and retreats, athletics and architecture. Each of these can be a door to the sacred, an incarnation of the divine, an epiphany of insight, a revelation about ourselves, each other and our world.

The key to tapping this potential is another trait that is especially revered at Jesuit schools, and that is contemplation. Sometimes limited by caricature to an individual's silent ponderings in a setting free from physical distraction, contemplation is also that ability to see perceptively the deeper reality contained in the physical. This is not an easy undertaking in a culture that is apprehensive at best about the role of symbols. In common parlance, the word "symbol" is most often preceded by two other words: "just a." When we say something is "just a symbol," we suggest that the physicality of the symbol is divorced from reality, unimportant, lacking in meaning and substance. If we were instead, like the Jesuit Gerard Manley Hopkins, to see that "the world is charged with the grandeur of God" "God's Grandeur," then we might also understand symbol as an epiphany of a deeper reality that can only be known through its physical manifestation but is not limited to its physical manifestation.

To contemplate a symbol is, first of all, to pay serious attention to the

physical. The Indian Jesuit Anthony de Mello called this "awareness," and he described it well in the final lines of his story *The Temple Bell*: "If you wish to see God, look attentively at creation. Don't reject it; don't reflect on it. Just look at it." When contemplation begins with serious attention to the physical, then it can lead to deeper insights and experiences of the symbol's underlying reality. Without this contemplative attitude, the physical can easily be minimized, ignored or reduced to the level of practicality.

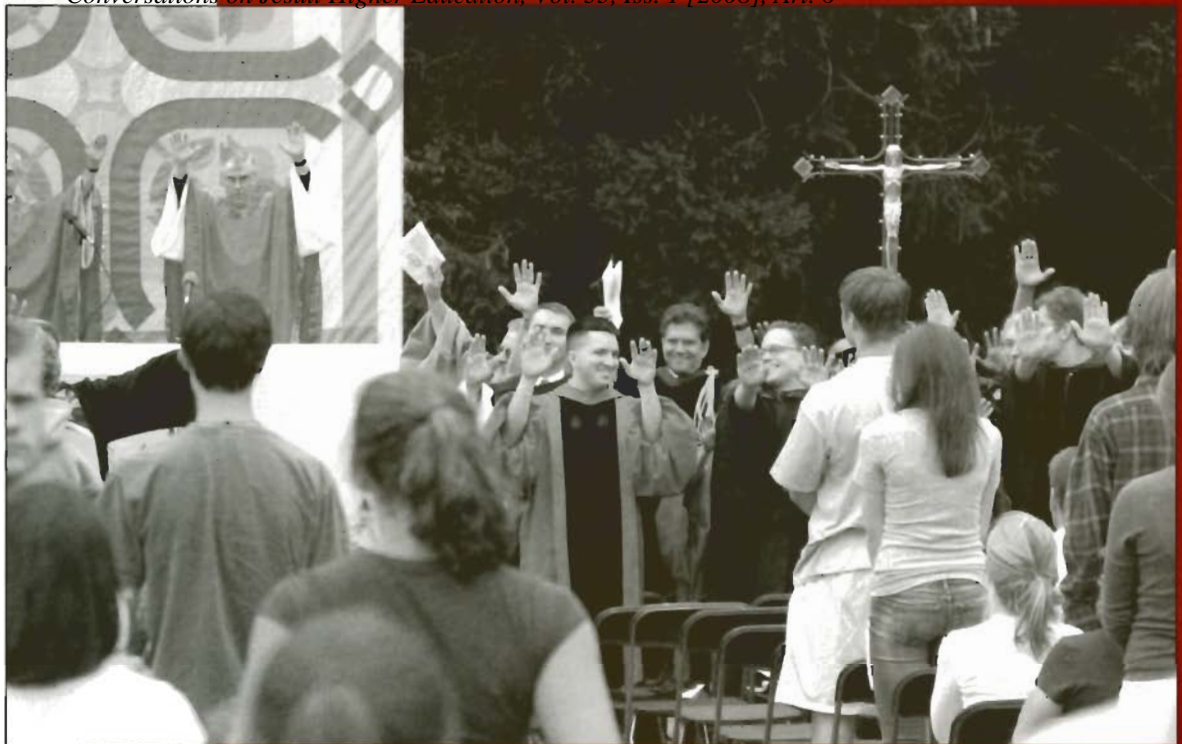
This was the concern that the Italian-German theologian Romano Guardini raised in 1964 when he asked if contemporary westerners were, in fact, capable of symbolic action. Not unlike an approach that limits education to the verbal and the mind, so religion was (and perhaps still is) for many "an individual inward matter which in the 'liturgy' took on the character of an official, public ceremonial. But the sense of the liturgical action was thereby lost. The faithful did not perform a proper liturgical act at all, it was simply a private and inward act, surrounded by ceremonial and not infrequently accompanied by a feeling that the ceremonial was really a disturbing factor" (*Herder Correspondence*, July 1964).

In a statement that suggests an important role for liturgy as a model for helping students and others to connect mind, body and spirit, Guardini went on to say that liturgy embraces "not only a spiritual inwardness, but the whole (person), body as well as spirit. Therefore, the external action (is) in itself a 'prayer,' a religious act; the times, places, and things included in the action (are) not merely external decorations, but elements of the whole act." Tying it all together, Guardini ended his letter with a question that will resonate with anyone who has ever coordinated campus liturgies or other college ceremonies. Will we be content, he wondered, with trying

to organize the procession better, or will we ask, "how can the act of walking become a religious act, a retinue for the Lord progressing through his land, so that an 'epiphany' may take place?"

Excessive pragmatism and verbalizing are no friends of liturgy or of the physical in general. The physical is often messy. Lining up a couple hundred faculty in their array of academic gowns is often a less than orderly affair, but an academic procession's physical expression of a diverse body of scholars committed to the common mission of educating students transcends any concern about how to organize the procession. Baptizing a student by immersion in the college chapel leaves the neophyte and the minister dripping wet and creates a puddle on the adjacent floor, but that pales in comparison to the physical manifestation of dying and being reborn in the tomb and womb of the baptismal font. Letting go of the lecture model when approaching the task of preaching and maximizing the non-verbal physical elements of liturgy, including sacred silence, can be a challenge for presiders whose spend much of their lives in the front of a classroom, but only in doing so will the liturgy's full potential for spiritual enrichment and encounter with the divine be unleashed.

An incarnational spirituality invites the individual and the community to grow in their relationship with God through contemplation of the myriad ways in which God is revealed through the physical. The liturgies on our campuses have the



## Jesuits and the Liturgy

- A Jesuit (John Gallen, S.J.) founded the North American Academy of Liturgy (a professional, academic, interfaith organization), and the Academy's membership includes a significant number of faculty members from AJCU schools.
- An American Jesuit (John Baldovin, S.J.) is the current president of the relatively new International Jungmann Society for Jesuits and Liturgy (named for the 20th century liturgical scholar Josef Jungmann, S.J.), and American Jesuits are well represented in the organization.
- Two AJCU schools sponsor centers for liturgy (Georgetown, headed by Larry Madden, S.J.; St. Louis, headed by John Foley, S.J.), and many others have faculty in their theology or religious studies department who specialize in liturgy.
- One of the most influential groups of liturgical musicians in the Roman Catholic Church since the Second Vatican Council has been the St. Louis Jesuits, so named because of their affiliation with St. Louis University. Among the ranks of today's most popular young composers of liturgical music are Tony Alonso at Loyola Marymount and Paul Melley at Holy Cross.
- Jesuits and their colleagues have been pioneers in exploring liturgical drama (eg, Michael Sparough, S.J. and the Fountain Square Fools) and liturgical dance (eg, Bob VerEecke, S.J. and the Boston Liturgical Dance Ensemble).
- A listserv links the chaplains and campus ministers whose primary focus is liturgy and/or liturgical music at the 28 AJCU colleges and universities.
- Many of the AJCU schools have made substantial investments in recent years in the building, renovation or restoration of their chapels.





Students approach the holy water font at Sunday liturgy, College of the Holy Cross.

potential to be a primary source of this spirituality and to offer a model to our larger educational mission of the synthesis of verbal and non-verbal physical elements. Last but not least, when our campus liturgies are experiences of contemplation of the physical as well as the verbal, they can transform us for the well-educat-

### *The physical is often messy.*

ed solidarity with the world's poor and powerless that Jesuit Superior General Peter-Hans Kolvenbach outlined as a goal of Jesuit education.

As the great advocate of liturgy and social justice, Robert Hovda,

rhetorically asked about liturgy, "Where else in our society are all of us – not just a gnostic elite, but everyone – called to be social critics, called to extricate ourselves from the powers and principalities that claim to rule our daily lives, in order to submit ourselves to the sole dominion of the God before whom all of us are equal? Where else in our society are we all addressed and sprinkled and bowed to and incensed and touched and kissed and treated like *somebody* – all in the very same way? Where else do economic czars and beggars get the same treatment? Where else are food and drink blessed in a common prayer of thanksgiving, broken and poured out, so that everybody, everybody

shares and shares alike?" ("The Mass and Its Social Consequences, *Liturgy* 80, June-July 1982, p. 6). The liturgies on our campuses have the potential to be an experience of solidarity and so transform us for the work of solidarity in the larger world when they immerse participants not only in the verbal but also in the physical which reveals more than words can say. ■

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